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SUBJECT: BELGIAN DEVELOPMENT MINISTER OUTLINES IDEAS TO SUPPORT AFGHANISTAN; TRAINING PROGRAM FOR IRAQ TO CONTINUE

REF: A. BRUSSELS 2473
 B. BRUSSELS 1070
 C. BRUSSELS 454

Classified By: ECONCOUNS TLROBL, REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

11. (C/NF) SUMMARY AND ACTION REQUEST: During Ambassador's July 13 meeting with Belgian Federal Minister of Cooperation and Development Armand De Decker the following topics were discussed: Afghanistan, Iraq, U.S. aid, and the upcoming elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DROC). The Minister outlined several proposals on Afghanistan including military aircraft support (a C-130 and possibly F-16s), sending civilians for a development component of a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), and possibly naming Afghanistan as a priority country to receive direct bilateral aid. Ambassador provided a note based on information from Embassy Kabul with suggestions of possible areas on which Belgian development assistance could focus. (Note: subsequent to this meeting post heard from De Decker's chief of staff that only the military component of support for Afghanistan will realistically take effect this year; the proposed aid initiatives cannot be budgeted before 2007. Also, for domestic political reasons, Belgium will not be able to lead a PRT at this time, but will pursue a role in a German- or Swedish-led PRT. End Note). For Iraq, Belgium plans to continue already established training programs for Iraqi diplomats, police, and judges. Regarding the Congo, De Decker expressed the belief that elections will proceed as scheduled and that Congolese President Kabila will be reelected. De Decker mentioned briefly a visit to Nairobi he had made to meet the new Somali government. Ambassador also corrected De Decker's apparent misimpressions regarding the quality and quantity of U.S. assistance to the developing world. Action request: De Decker asked whether USAID is present in every PRT in Afghanistan. Post requests Department prepare an answer for USDel to Budapest PRT conference to convey to Belgian del, with a copy to post.
END SUMMARY AND ACTION REQUEST.

ATTENDEES

12. (SBU) Ambassador, EconCouns (acting DCM), and Econoff met with Minister Armand De Decker; Pierre Vaesen, his

Chief of Staff; Michel Lastschenko, Special Envoy for the fight against AIDS; and Jonathon Biermann, a senior advisor, on July 13 in the Minister's office.

BELGIAN MINISTER'S REPORT FROM RECENT VISIT TO AFGHANISTAN

¶3. (C/NF) In mid-June, De Decker and several advisors, including Biermann, visited Afghanistan with General James Jones (SHAPE Commander) and Louis Michel, the European Union's Minister for Development and Humanitarian Aid. De Decker's view is that while NATO's role is "useful," more attention should be devoted to the role of development assistance. De Decker stated that, "We cannot win against the Taliban only with a military presence. We have to change the quality of life of the people to give them strength to fight the Taliban and to resist the urge to kick out the foreigners." The Minister's view is that more must be done to strengthen local leadership. According to De Decker, without a perceptible improvement in basic services, the Afghans will be tempted to look back to the Taliban, who are using narcotic money to invest in visible improvements, particularly in the provinces, which operate with little supervision from the Karzai government.

¶4. (C/NF) De Decker stated that the international community "has lost time (in Afghanistan) as far as development is concerned." He called for development aid to be organized and implemented "very, very quickly," beginning in the north where De Decker believes there is more chance of successful implementation. Southern Afghanistan, according to the minister, has "many armed Taliban ready to fight" and, consequently, progress "will be more difficult there." He also noted that several Afghan officials asked for increased help in controlling that country's borders.

BELGIAN MINISTERS TO CONSIDER OPTIONS ON AFGHANISTAN

¶5. (C/NF) De Decker told Ambassador that he would present several draft proposals to other Belgian federal ministers during an upcoming meeting of Council of Ministers (either July 14 or 20; July 21 is the Belgian National Day). However, De Decker was careful to explain that his proposals face resistance, notably from the Flemish socialists, whom he complained take an un-strategic view. The Minister discussed the following with Ambassador:

-Organizing a conference in Brussels (date TBD) to bring together "only multilateral organizations" such as the World Bank, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and others to design coordinated development assistance strategies.

-Speeding up the availability of a Belgian C-130 aircraft for use in Afghanistan. Currently the plane is scheduled to arrive for service in Afghanistan in September, but De Decker said he is going to press for the C-130 to arrive in early August.

-Sending some F-16s "like the Dutch".

-Sending "development people," protected by soldiers, to work in a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), possibly with the Swedes or the Germans. (Belgian soldiers are already part of a German-led PRT in Konduz.).

-Naming Afghanistan as a priority partner for Belgian assistance for one, two, or three years. This would facilitate committing Belgian assistance funds and human resources to Afghanistan.

¶6. (SBU) De Decker said eventually Belgium could consider joining the French and Turks in securing Kabul, but not before Belgian Federal elections next year. De Decker also expressed the hope that Belgium could eventually lead a PRT, and noted that Luxembourg has already expressed interest in joining were that to become a reality.

ANTI-POPPY CULTIVATION PROJECT UNDERWAY IN AFGHANISTAN

17. (SBU) De Decker confirmed that the anti-poppy cultivation project is underway in Afghanistan (ref B paras 7-8). After an initial fact-finding phase, the project has completed the second phase, which was a visit of various Afghan ministers to Thailand to see how a model program has worked there. He cautioned that it required 18 years to get some success in Thailand. According to De Decker, Afghan officials came up with proposals to substitute different crops for opium, and to develop food-processing industries to provide value added.

FOLLOWUP ON AFGHANISTAN

18. (SBU) On Friday, July 14, EconCouns followed up with De Decker, s Chief of Staff Pierre Vaesen. Vaesen said Afghanistan was discussed at some length at that day's Council of Ministers meeting, but nothing was definitively settled. The Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and Development Minister argued hard to get more for Afghanistan, making some headway. A potential offer of 4 F-16s was discussed, as was speeding up the C-130 delivery to early August. The last Council of Ministers before the summer break, to be held on the eve (July 20) of Belgium, s national day, should according to Vaesen firm up the military side of things. In terms of Development Ministry resources, while they have committed in principle to 30 million Euros over a period of four years, the 7-8 million per year is not in the budget yet. Vaesen noted the designation of Afghanistan as a priority country has yet to be proposed formally but will be July 20. He expressed regret that a Belgium-owned PRT would not be possible in the current political climate, but promised he himself is working with the Germans, Swedes and others to determine where Belgian participation can have the best impact. Vaesen also confirmed he will represent the GOB

at the first day of the July 20-21 PRT Effectiveness conference in Budapest (ref A), before leaving for Asia on July 21. Econoff will follow up with Jonathan Biermann after this week's Council of Ministers and report any additional significant developments.

19. (SBU) Separately, on July 13, Jan Vermeir, attache responsible for food aid in the Belgian Federal Ministry of Cooperation and Development, reported to Econoff that Belgium has given "new money" totaling 500,000 euros to the World Food Program (WFP). This latest donation is in response to an "urgent call" by the WFP and Belgian diplomatic reporting from Kabul that stated that hungry Afghans were "eating grass." Vermeir said that the proposal has been sent to Minister De Decker for his signature, and that he foresees the Minister signing it within days. According to Vermeir, the donation will be used to buy, at least in part, 12,000 tons of wheat from Pakistan that should arrive in Afghanistan approximately two weeks later.

110. (C/NF) COMMENT: On Afghanistan, De Decker has yet to deliver on his promises. On one hand, he talks a lot about items in the purview of the Defense Ministry while on the other hand, he has thus far failed to secure resources from his own ministry, like civilians for PRT or increased development assistance. This has infuriated Minister of Defense Flahaut, and provided Flahaut with an excuse to foot-drag on military items. That said, De Decker appears to be inching the Council of Ministers in the right direction. Post will continue to press the issue; we have better leverage and potential for Belgian help in Afghanistan than in Iraq. END COMMENT

IRAQ - BELGIUM WILL CONTINUE TRAINING

111. (C/NF) In response to questioning from Ambassador what more Belgium might do in Iraq, De Decker noted that because garnering support for Afghanistan is "already difficult", any new initiatives on Iraq are unlikely for now. He highlighted existing commitments and several programs already completed. These include: training for Iraqi diplomats and police, support of the constitutional process, and capacity building

for border control management. De Decker said that the training programs would continue. Until the security situation in Iraq improves, Belgium is reluctant to send a Belgian Ambassador to Baghdad.

CORRECTING MISIMPRESSIONS ON U.S. ASSISTANCE

¶12. (SBU) In a mid-June radio interview, De Decker had claimed that European development assistance was "10-15 times" that of the U.S. Ambassador took the opportunity to clarify the figures for U.S. contributions, and passed a note with more details, including what the U.S. is doing in Africa and the Congo. He also highlighted the importance of U.S. private donations, as well as U.S. endeavors to encourage economic growth and trade that will have an impact on development. While De Decker appeared to take the points on board, Vaesen (who may have been the author of the offending media talkers) noted that U.S. aid levels are measured differently than other countries and therefore are not easily comparable.

UPCOMING ELECTIONS IN FORMER BELGIAN CONGO

¶13. (C/NF) Ahead of the July 30 presidential and parliamentary elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DROC), De Decker said that he was "angry" with Belgian media's exaggerated portrayals of spiraling violence and chaos in DROC. According to him, the "elections will take place normally" and that the unrest is not as serious as has been portrayed in the Belgian media. De Decker said "90 percent of the Congolese want the elections to take place July 30." He said he is confident, adding, "We have to be," and underscoring Belgium's contribution of \$400 million for election support in DROC. De Decker also thinks that current DROC president Joseph Kabila will win, although he was not sure if it would take one round of elections or two for

Kabila to be elected.

DE DECKER AFRICA TRAVELS

¶14. (SBU) In the past few weeks, De Decker has traveled to the Great Lakes region and to Morocco for the EU summit with African nations on migration issues. He also mentioned a recent stop in Nairobi to meet with Somali leaders. This may have been in part to help his francophone liberal party (MR) compatriot, EU Development Commissioner Louis Michel, prepare for meetings on Somalia in Brussels the week of July 17.

BIO NOTE

¶15. (U) Note: De Decker is running for the mayor of the Brussels commune of Uccle in local elections to be held October 8. If elected, De Decker would take office in January 2007. In Belgium, office holders can hold both municipal and Federal positions at the same time, as well as other multiple jobs: the only exception is for Federal Ministers. However, De Decker could take advantage of a loophole by naming his deputy mayor to act in his stead, and still keep the Mayor's title. Many national political figures, including the Heads of both houses of parliament, also wear the Mayor's sash. End Note

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